

BOOK REVIEWS

Mohini Attam. The special number of *Marg* (Vol. XXVI, No.2) on Mohini Attam is probably the only publication in English, of high research value, on a lesser known dance-form of Kerala on which material even in Malayalam is very scanty.

Since Indian scholars have an obsessional passion for proving that every cultural tradition in this country is of incredible antiquity, sometimes reaching back even to geological time, it is not surprising that attempts have been made to establish that *Mohini Attam* is at least a thousand years old. But it is more likely that the dance-form reached maturity only in the nineteenth century.

A form of entertainment by dancing girls, known as *Dasi Attam*, seems to have flourished on the east coast from the early days. It had very little classical status though it might have borrowed some of the more elementary steps and gestures of the *Bharata Natyam*. As the name itself suggests, it was essentially a light entertainment with the accent on the erotic. A reference in the literary work, *Vavahara Mala*, written in 1709, suggests that the tradition might have infiltrated into the west coast too, for payment to dancers of this and other categories is mentioned. But it was never so popular in Kerala as it was in Tamil Nadu. It was the assimilative and classicizing genius of Swati Tirunal, ruler of Travancore, which created a fine art form out of this rather unpromising material and transformed it into the "Dance of the Enchantress".

Like Emperor Julian, Keats and Mozart, Swati Tirunal died early for he had not completed thirty-four at the time of his death in 1847. But this extraordinary personality combined the administrative genius of the first, the poetic genius of the second and was a composer like the third. In the *Mohini Attam*, he was probably trying to create a crisp elegant, light-weight form as a relief from the heavy-weight dance-drama, *Kathakali*. A great integrationist, he combined the features of

both *Kathakali* and *Bharata Natyam*, always keeping care to see that the form remained lyrical, transparent in communication. The basic stances are from *Kathakali* and like it, the dance narrates a story. The *Cholkattu* of *Mohini Attam* is the equivalent of the *Alarippu* of *Bharata Natyam*. But while the latter is abstract rhythmical pattern, the former incorporates mimesis of a lyrical narrative. The *Varnams* too are weighted in favour of lyrical narration and even where the *Jati* syllables (abstract note equivalents, not semantic word equivalents) are employed, the lyrical intention is conserved by singing them to specific *Ragas*. Most of the *Pada Varnams* for *Mohini Attam* are those composed by Swati.

The intrusion of episodic representations which destroyed the delicate balance in which the erotic sentiment was held and invited "audience participation" purely for titillation brought about the decadence of *Mohini Attam*. Swati, with his passionate faith and fine record in integration (he has composed Hindustani songs to Hindustani *Ragas*) would rejoice, if he were alive today, to see the revival of the form by gifted dancers from outside Kerala like Shanta Rao and Kanak Rele. The *Marg* number too is a deserved homage; and it is a very fine one too, for it has managed to be an in-depth research study and a fine album of drawings and photographs at the same time.

Krishna Chaitanya

Musical Instruments in Indian Sculpture, by G.H. and Nalini Tarleker. pp. vi+104. Price Rs. 10. Sponsored by the Sangeet Samsodhan Mandal, Bharat Gayan Samaj, Pune. Pub. by Pune Vidyarthi Griha Prakashan, Pune. 1972.

This small but informative book is very welcome in a subject where there is a scarcity of literature. The Tarlekers have been studying this subject for some years and have come out with what is, I presume, a preliminary work. For this is a vast and complicated area and will require the sustained effort of many scholars working for many years to accomplish a reasonably good history of instruments.

The book spans "the period right from 200 B.C. to 1800 A.D." covers almost the whole of the country. The enormity of time and space involved can well be imagined. The authors have therefore given only a distant satellite view. In brief they have divided the time-stream into the pre-*Natyasastra* period (prior to 200 B.C.), early period (200 B.C.—10th A.D.) and medieval-post-medieval period (11th-18th A.D.). The methodology of discussion is laid down in pp. 5-6.

The first of the stringed instruments to be mentioned is *gargara*. This is identified by Sachs as a harp. But Sayana was perhaps more correct, and I guess it was kind of scraper. There is a slight contradiction in the description of *vana*. It is possible that it was an aeolian harp; but then how could it have been played by a "curved reed" as given here. Again the *Aitarevaly Aranyaka's veena* (p. 8) had a *siras* (head) which the authors identify as a gourd; more likely, it was something of a *yali* as in current *Sarasvati veena* of South India. The *ekatantri* family (p. 23) "was plucked by fingers or *kona* and then pressing it by the fingers of the other hand"; but it is known that the *ekatantri* was played with *kamrika* in the left hand, like the modern *gottuvadyam*. We may have to take fretting to Matanga (5th-9th A.D.) and not to Nanyadeva (11th A.D.), as given here (p. 29). Fig. 35 (from Jagat) of *pinaki veena* is not convincing; it does not show a bowed instrument. Violin and *sarod* are wrongly coupled (p. 43). The authors are perhaps nearer the truth in identifying the *chitra* as a harp. I am not sure if Fig. 39 is of a *rudra veena* (now used in north India).

In the chapter on wind instruments, Fig. 56 is said to be a drawing from Mataji temple at Jagat, and of a *madhukari*, an oboe. From the photograph of the sculpture, only the position of playing makes one suspect a *madhukari*; there are no holes as shown in the drawing here.

The diagrams are neat, but highly stylized. This latter fact introduces many errors, specially as they have undergone copying by more than one hand (Fig. 25-27). Also, relying on some modern musea is not always advisable! For example Fig. 5 is said to be that of a *yazh*; nothing can be farther from available descriptions.

There is a glossary, an index and a short bibliography.

B.C. Deva

Bharatiya Sangeet Vadya (in Hindi). Lalmani Misra. Bharatiya Jnan Pith, New Delhi, 1973. pp. 8+200. Illustrated. Price Rs. 40.

This book appears to be a dissertation by Dr. Misra and now published.

Indian organology has suffered from a lack of intensive and/or extensive literature. There are many problems still facing us; even source material is scarce. The present work therefore is a commendable beginning.

The first chapter is a very general one.

The second deals with the classification of instruments. On p. 13 there are ten kinds of sounds given. These perhaps have nothing to do with the "physical" sounds of instruments but are those "heard" in paramental states. Stressing the necessity for a detailed classification the author discusses cases like *upang*, *anand lahari* and etc. A new class is suggested for such instruments : *tata-avanaddha*. This is a point that merits attention. The group *taranga vadya* does not seem necessary. The classification of wind instruments into two groups (a) blown with the mouth and (b) excited otherwise—also does not appear satisfactory.

The next chapter deals with stringed instruments. The usual statement that Indian music originates in the *veda*-s commence the chapter. This is an age old idea : the monolithic origin of Indian music. Certainly, this *grammar* is the oldest we know of. But is the *music* the only one seed ?

Besides the ancient *tata vadya* of the *samhita*-s etc. about fifty others are described. There is also a section on the technique on *veena* playing. The Figs, 34 & 39 do not tally with the description of *ekatantri*. Whether the *chitra* was a *lute* as given here is doubtful. It was more probably a harp, with seven strings. Again, the assertion that ancient Indian visual art was "realistic" is open to question. Indeed, during certain periods it was extremely stylized and one has to be very cautious in taking sculptural evidence too much for granted. The reasons for the disappearance of the *dandi veena* are not convincing; after all the *dasa* singers of Karnataka were using it even in the 16th cent. *Mahati* is given as Narada's *veena*; but the *tambura* is also called by the same name (cf.p. 48 & Fig. 118). The essay on the *sitar* is again a longish one, though not much critical discussion takes place on its origins. It is again a matter for discussion and enquiry if the *tritantri*, often considered an earlier form of the *sitar* on *linguistic* (not organological) similarity in *name*, was a zither or a lute.

The instruments in this chapter are all given in an alphabetical order. This serves no scholarly purpose, for it does not connect the instruments into historical and morphological links and groups. This is a drawback in all the chapters and such a listing could have very well been put as an index *which is lacking*.

The chapter on drums describes about thirtyfive. The figure of *nissan* (Fig. 150) does not tally with the description. *Pataha* is here taken as a barrel drum, as is usual; but premedieval texts seem to mean a frame drum by this word. *Mukhachang* is not an *avanaddha vadya* and should not have been included here. *Runja* as given in Fig. 161 is the *pambai* of Tamil nadu; *runja* as known in Andhra is a truncated cone covered on one side and open on the other.

About fifteen wind instruments and almost an equal number of idiophones have been described. Incidentally, *sukti vadya* is a kind of scraper used by many tribes even today and found in many sculptures; it is quite possible that the *gargara* of *rgveda* (not mentioned in this book) might be the earliest notice of such a *ghana vadya*. Fig. 22 is really one such, but is wrongly identified as a *drum*! Fig. 64 is also of a scraper, though not so identified by the author.

In the chapter on middle ages, *kmaicha* is described. Is it so recent as that? for it is one of the oldest bowed instruments known to us in world literature. It is perhaps better to avoid this 'middle' ages and 'medieval'! These are very relative terms and what was once 'middle age' has by now become ancient.

There is a chapter on the comparative study of instruments. Here (p. 122) is a statement that *shadja* could not be stabilized in our music as long as the *mahati* and *ekatantri* were important. If the *mahati* was a psaltery, this cannot be logical as the *ekatantri* would belong to an entirely different family—the zithers.

Modern instruments, *israj*, *tembura*, *dilruba*, *rudra veena* and others are described. But, the *ghatam* (an Idiophone) is included amongst the chordophones (p. 124).

There are chapters on *gats*, *paran*, *kaida* and so on, folk instruments, acoustics, social context of instruments which are thought provoking.

The book has 220 illustrations, some of them previously published by C.R. Day and P. Sambamoorthy. Here again some discrepancies could have been avoided. Fig. 19 is from Abneri temple; this is often dated as 8th cent. A.D., though here it is given as the 10th. In Fig. 21 is given *alapini veena* with two strings; but the text (p. 31) describes it with three. Some take it as an one-stringed *veena*. It is possible that the sculpture is that of *nakuli*. Often *ghana vadya* is wrongly translated as drum—e.g. Fig. 24. shows *manjira*, but the English title is 'drum player'. In the English comment on Fig. 19 the author says that Abner (10th cent. according to him, but 8th according to some) *veena* is the "first" picture where a definite arrangement of the frets is seen. However, frets have been noted in the Pattadakal lute (7th A.D.). Incidentally, this book itself has a picture of the Pattadakal lute; but the author is wary—and perhaps rightly so—in accepting these as frets.

It would have been of great help to researchers and students if correct sources with dates (in an alphabetical order), organological grouping (and not alphabetical as now) of instruments and an index had been incorporated.

This a good beginning and it is hoped that more work, with logical basis will follow from this and other scholars.

B.C.D.

